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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 17th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. SAMANA (Papua New Guinea)
(Vice-Chairman)

later: Mr. HUDYMA (Ukraine)
(Chairman)

CONTENTS

AGENDA ITEM 77: UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST (continued)

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In the absence of Mr. Hudyma (Ukraine), Mr. Samana (Papua New Guinea), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 77: UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST (continued) (A/49/13, A/49/288-S/1994/903, A/49/439, A/49/440, A/49/441, A/49/442, A/49/443, A/49/448, A/49/488, A/49/505, A/49/509 and A/49/570)

1. Mr. ELARABY (Egypt) said that for over forty years the international community had placed great hopes in a comprehensive and full solution to the Palestinian problem in all its aspects, including the problem of Palestinian refugees. The developments since the Madrid Conference of 1991, including the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, the Cairo Agreement and the early empowerment accord, made it possible to be optimistic about the future. However, it should be borne in mind that a just solution of the problem was impossible without ensuring all the national rights of the Palestinian people, including the rights to repatriation and compensation recognized in General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

2. With the progress that had already been achieved, the question arose of the need to expand the activities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA); there was general agreement about its special role at the transitional stage leading to a final settlement. His delegation paid tribute to the effectiveness with which UNRWA had responded to the need to carry out new tasks under the new conditions. UNRWA had made a substantial contribution to the work of the working group established by the Secretary-General for those purposes. In consultation with the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and with the financial support of donor countries, UNRWA had embarked on the Peace Implementation Programme. It was gratifying that UNRWA was expanding its activities and that, rather than confining itself to providing assistance, it was encouraging the Palestinians to gain economic independence by promoting the development of income-generating activities and allocating resources to training for small businesses. Agreement had also been reached on its participation in the payment of salaries to the Palestinian police. Donors had immediately reacted favourably to the new proposals by UNRWA and had granted substantial resources for their implementation. Egypt hoped that, as a result of international recognition of the role of UNRWA in promoting the development of the peace process as a whole, it would also be possible to increase the volume of resources allocated to the regular budget of UNRWA, which still had a considerable financial deficit. Along with the new requirements, there was also a growing need for resources to carry out traditional activities in the areas of health, education, food, environmental protection and job-creation, both in the occupied territories and beyond.

3. Egypt welcomed the transfer of the headquarters of UNRWA to the region of its activity, and also the positive developments noted in the report of the

Commissioner-General leading to the withdrawal of Israeli troops from some areas of the Gaza Strip and Jericho.

4. Egypt hoped that, within the framework of the peace process, the tragedy of the Palestinian people and of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories would soon be brought to an end. It also hoped that, in his next report, the Commissioner-General would be able to report tangible cooperation between the Palestinians and the occupying authorities and that the report would be a basis for strengthening trust between the two sides and consolidating many positive aspects of the process of the establishment and maintenance of peace.

5. His delegation believed that there was every opportunity to achieve consensus in the General Assembly on the draft resolution on UNRWA. That was particularly important at a time when there was international agreement on the significance of the role of UNRWA in the development of the peace process in the Middle East.

6. Egypt would not wish to disregard the vitally important role of UNRWA in providing assistance to Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, where there were more than 1.7 million Palestinians. That represented a constructive contribution to the multilateral negotiations and would ultimately make it possible to achieve a just resolution of the remaining issues.

7. Egypt noted that, although the problems had not yet been fully resolved, it could be said that the international community was on the right track leading to the attainment of the goals for which UNRWA had been established - the goals of a just and comprehensive solution of the situation of the Palestinian refugees within the framework of a peace settlement guaranteeing all the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people.

8. Mr. PIBULSONGGRAM (Thailand) said that there had been a number of positive developments following the signing of the Declaration of Principles, including the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan. In the relations between the Syrian Arab Republic and Israel, and between Lebanon and Israel, hatred and revenge were being replaced by mutual understanding and cooperation. That was how it should be.

9. That historic breakthrough held out the promise of cooperation between Palestine, Israel and its Arab neighbours; its positive effects would be felt on a much wider regional scale. However, the results would materialize only if the Palestinians were given a chance to develop a viable economic infrastructure to sustain the foundation of the Palestinian nation. It was only through economic and social development that conditions for lasting peace and stability could be created. During the current period of transition, UNRWA would have a crucial role to play in helping to improve social and welfare services and the standard of living of the Palestinian refugees.

10. If the expectations raised by the recent developments were to be fulfilled, it was important to give substantive and visible support to the work undertaken by UNRWA. In that connection, his delegation was deeply concerned about the financial difficulties faced by UNRWA. Everyone agreed that UNRWA was a symbol

of the international commitment to the Palestinian people; his delegation therefore called on all Member States to contribute generously to its budget. Lip-service alone would never translate aspirations into reality. Countries with large resources should make their fair share of contributions; countries with limited resources should make some contribution to reflect their commitment to the constructive work of UNRWA. Thailand, for its part, would maintain its level of support.

11. Mr. SOEGARDA (Indonesia) said there was no doubt that the historic developments in the Middle East peace process would have a profound impact on UNRWA activities and programmes; UNRWA had entered a new era in its relationship with the Palestinian population.

12. It was undeniable that social and economic development was an essential prerequisite for achieving long-term political stability. The urgent task that currently confronted the international community was to ensure that the Gaza Strip and Jericho were transformed into areas of peace and prosperity, and for that to happen it was essential that the Palestinian people should be given the opportunity to build a viable economic infrastructure. Such an approach would not only enable the new Palestinian Authority to assume its role in governance with success but also promote peace and security in the region.

13. His delegation welcomed the new initiatives undertaken by UNRWA in response to recent political changes, noting in particular the Peace Implementation Programme designed to achieve a rapid improvement of the socio-economic infrastructure in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and was gratified that the programme had been extended to Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

14. The recent agreement concluded by the (PLO) and UNRWA would ensure the continuation of humanitarian relief services as well as the expansion of programmes in the field of economic and social development, thus reflecting the emerging priorities and meeting the current and long-term needs of the Palestinian people. UNRWA's activities had been augmented by a number of significant steps initiated by the Secretary-General, including the establishment of a task force to establish an integrated United Nations approach towards development in the Gaza Strip and Jericho and the appointment of a Special Coordinator.

15. Owing to its vast experience and long history of services rendered to the local population, UNRWA had a pivotal role to play in sustaining the peace process. The signing of the historic Declaration of Principles and a number of subsequent agreements had heralded the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the region, thereby giving concrete hope that the long suffering of the Palestinian people would soon end. His delegation earnestly hoped that the peace process would be strengthened and developed through all channels and would ultimately result in a just and lasting peace in the Middle East based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

16. He welcomed the decision to relocate UNRWA's headquarters from Vienna to Gaza by 1995, which demonstrated the United Nations strong commitment to making peace a success as well as its confidence in the Palestinian Authority. For

its part, Indonesia would continue to lend its unswerving support to the Palestinian people and the PLO as its sole legitimate representative. Indonesia's yearly contribution to UNRWA had been tripled to meet the critical needs of the occupied territories. As an expression of solidarity with the Palestinian people, Indonesia had pledged $5 million during the 1993 donors' conference. He commended the tremendous efforts that UNRWA had exerted under extremely difficult and dangerous conditions and remained confident that its mandate would be successfully concluded in the near future.

17. Mr. MAHMOUD (Lebanon) said that UNRWA's services would be needed for a long time to come. He believed that it would be premature to discuss UNRWA's life span, since that would give the wrong signal to donor countries at a time when the Agency faced serious financial difficulties. Palestinian refugees would continue to depend on the social, health and educational services provided by UNRWA until they could exercise their right of return as stated in General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

18. Regarding the report of the Commissioner-General, Lebanon appreciated the support which the Agency had given to thousands of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East and was convinced that a consensus should emerge among interested parties, particularly host Governments, regarding a perception of UNRWA and its future.

19. Lebanon was host to half a million Palestinian refugees, and their security and safety was increasing with the ongoing normalization of the situation in the country. Lebanon supported their right to self-determination over their land and rejected any attempt to settle them in Lebanon.

20. The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, like the Lebanese, had suffered from the tragic events in Lebanon from 1975-1990, when thousands of Palestinian families had been displaced. The Lebanese Government was currently embarking on an extensive programme to return displaced persons. That endeavour required large financial support, and his delegation noted with satisfaction the appeal contained in the report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (A/49/570) calling on Member States to consider making additional contributions in support of ongoing emergency-related and special programmes in Lebanon.

21. His delegation once again expressed its appreciation for UNRWA's invaluable services and dedication, and commended the generosity of donor countries over the decades; it called on them to continue supporting UNRWA until the Palestinian refugee problem had finally been solved through a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

22. Ms. DARMANIN (Malta) noted that more than a year had passed since the signing of the Declaration of Principles by the Government of Israel and the PLO. During that period violence had again been committed by those who wanted to derail the possibility of reconciliation achieved through a just, lasting and comprehensive peace, and only the strong political will of the Palestinian and Israeli leadership had helped to withstand those acts of provocation.

23. It had to be acknowledged that the process of change in the region was irreversible. The agreement signed recently between Jordan and Israel underscored the culture of peace which was slowly but surely spreading its roots in the Middle East. A comprehensive perspective to resolve so many long-standing issues required the commitment of all States in the region. Such momentous tasks marked the beginning of a process that had long been awaited by the peoples of the region and the international community as a whole. The international community had to show solidarity not just in word but also in deed at a time when it was needed most.

24. A solution in the Middle East must take into account the difficulties that displaced persons and refugees encountered on a daily basis. The international community had shown itself sensitive to the needs of Palestine refugees by providing them with the necessary assistance through UNRWA. Ever since its inception in 1949, UNRWA had catered to the needs of Palestine refugees in the fields of education, health, relief and social services, extending its activities to Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

25. The provision of assistance was put to best use when it addressed the long-term needs of the community, and a future-oriented approach should ensure that Palestinians would be able to meet their own needs. The Government of Malta welcomed the Agency's Peace Implementation Programme, which provided schemes related to income-generation and job-creation, measures to improve the environment and investment for the improvement of infrastructure in education, health care and social services.

26. Education and human resources development provided the foundation for a sustainable democratic society. The Government of Malta commended the Agency's efforts to ensure continuity in that regard. The continued and smooth implementation of the educational process must be ensured, and her delegation hoped that the interruptions in the academic achievement of pupils in the West Bank and Gaza, particularly those due to military-ordered closures and curfews, would cease to occur.

27. The transfer of UNRWA headquarters from Vienna to the Gaza Strip by the end of 1995 was meant to enhance the Agency's ability to respond to the needs of the Palestinian people during the transition period. In carrying out that operation, the Agency should ensure that the costs of the transfer did not have an adverse effect on the services that it provided and that full consideration was given to the operational logistics related to its activities in the Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon and Jordan.

28. The successful implementation of the peace accords depended on the effective use of financial resources, and her delegation commended the objectives for sustaining and strengthening the ongoing Middle East process that had been set at the Middle East and North African economic summit that had been held in Casablanca the previous week. The role of UNRWA should be assessed within that framework. The flexible structures developed by the Agency would certainly facilitate the eventual handing over of its work and programmes to the Palestinian Authority. In its transition to self-rule, the Palestinian people would be able to benefit from the Agency's activities through the wider support of States Members of the United Nations. For many years, UNRWA had played a

central role in alleviating the suffering of Palestine refugees, and her delegation was convinced that the continued efforts of the Agency would secure peace and stability for the Palestinian people and the region for the benefit of humankind.

29. Mr. AL-HAMDAM (Saudi Arabia) thanked the Secretary-General for his report, which had been submitted in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 48/40, and the Commissioner-General of UNRWA for his comprehensive report on the work of the Agency, which contained valuable statistics and information that merited close scrutiny.

30. The report provided information about the important activities that the Agency was undertaking in spite of political and financial difficulties, especially in the light of recent events in the peace process, which had complicated the Agency's work and its obligations towards the Palestinian people in the occupied territories and in Palestinian camps in neighbouring countries.

31. He called on all remaining countries to provide the Agency with comprehensive moral and financial support. Saudi Arabia had given UNRWA US$ 20 million in financial assistance to promote the peace process, in which the Agency should play an important role.

32. His delegation hoped that the United Nations would take steps to solve the problem of Palestine refugees in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). In that regard, he referred to the arbitrary acts of the Israeli authorities, including the detention of UNRWA officials and the unwarranted closing of the occupied territories, and called for an end to that practice, which hindered the Middle East peace process. He hoped that the international community would provide more active support for the work of UNRWA and that the Middle East peace process would succeed.

33. Mr. AL-HASSAN (Oman) said that, since its establishment, UNRWA had rendered important services to Palestine refugees, which enhanced their standard of living, provided them with health care and education and contributed to their economic development. The Agency had proven to be the international body most capable of meeting the needs of Palestine refugees. His delegation hoped that the Agency's role would be strengthened until the achievement of a final settlement in the Middle East.

34. His delegation welcomed the transfer of the Agency's headquarters by the end of 1995 to the Gaza Strip. Such a transfer was essential and would help increase coordination between UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority. The Agency was predicting a shortfall of US$ 43 million and had been forced to make cutbacks. Like other States, Oman requested the United Nations to cover the costs of the transfer.

35. Since the signing of the Declaration of Principles by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, there had been significant progress, in particular the signing of the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty. Such progress augured well for the future of the peace process, the goal of which was to achieve a final settlement of the Middle East problem, in particular the problem of refugees. In his report (A/49/13), the Commissioner-General had given a

positive account of the changes taking place in the Middle East, especially in the areas under Palestinian control. He called on all the parties involved to comply with their obligations and work in the interests of stability and security. That pertained particularly to Israel which, under General Assembly resolution 194 (III), was obliged to guarantee the return of refugees. Peace would not be complete as long as the problem of Palestine refugees remained and those refugees continued to suffer.

36. His delegation had taken note of donor countries' support for the Agency's programmes; such support would continue to be needed. The Omani Government had always provided UNRWA with material and moral support.

37. Mr. AL KHULEEFAH (Kuwait) expressed his appreciation to the Commissioner-General and his staff for their continuing humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian refugees, who were still living in conditions of occupation, despite the recent historic achievements. He hoped that those achievements would ultimately lead to a definitive settlement of the Middle East problem.

38. Commenting on the Commissioner-General's report (A/49/13), he noted with regret that, as indicated in chapter VIII, there continued to be disruptions in the work of educational establishments in the West Bank because of action by the Israeli administration. In that regard, the Agency should be commended for having arranged to distribute self-learning materials among the pupils. The fact that UNRWA had delivered primary health care services to over 500,000 Palestinian refugees in the West Bank should also be commended.

39. Turning to chapter IX of the report, he expressed great appreciation for the work being conducted by UNRWA in education in the self-rule area of the Gaza Strip, particularly with regard to improving the qualifications of education staff. The Agency also deserved praise for the health-care service established in five large camps and in Gaza town.

40. Mention should also be made of the Peace Implementation Programme, which had been modified by the Agency in the light of the evolving situation.

41. Despite the positive achievements in the peace process, it continued to be painful to observe the actions of Israel in the occupied territories mentioned in the report. They included the continuation of arrests and acts of interference with the Agency, which affected the quality of the services provided by UNRWA to the Palestinian refugees.

42. Kuwait had welcomed the signing by Israel and the PLO of the Declaration of Principles as a step towards a comprehensive, just and durable settlement in the Middle East in accordance with Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973). The step-by-step movement towards peace, which had begun in Madrid and in which Kuwait was also participating, would ultimately provide the Palestinians with the possibility of establishing an independent State in their own land, ensure the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories, and enable the refugees to return home in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 194 (III), paragraph 11.

43. Owing to the need to strengthen what had been achieved, Kuwait had taken part in the meeting of donor countries convened at the initiative of the United States on 1 October 1993. At that meeting, Kuwait had pledged a contribution of $25 million for development projects in the self-rule areas under the supervision of a specialized international body. Kuwait would continue to provide support to the Agency, including aid in the form of voluntary contributions to the UNRWA budget. Kuwait's current contribution amounted to $1.5 million.

44. In conclusion, he expressed support for the transfer of UNRWA headquarters to the Gaza Strip; the transfer would make it possible to improve the level of services provided by the Agency to Palestinian refugees.

45. Mr. GRIFFIN (Australia) said that his country had warmly welcomed and given full support to the implementation of the Israel-PLO Agreement on self-rule in Gaza and Jericho. For peace to take root, there must be economic development and an improvement in the quality of life of ordinary Palestinians.

46. Australia would again like to acknowledge the central role being played by UNRWA. Its social and humanitarian work had been a significant factor in helping to reduce social and economic pressures, with their potential to exacerbate political tensions in the region. Australia was pleased that UNRWA was cooperating so effectively with the new Palestinian Authority. The Agency's expertise and experience would be an important asset in the process of institution-building which must now be taken forward. He was confident that the Agency would respond resourcefully and effectively to the new demands and challenges of Palestinian self-rule.

47. Australia supported the proposed transfer of UNRWA's headquarters to Gaza as a means of demonstrating the international community's commitment to the peace process, and also for the benefits the move should bring to Gaza. At the same time, it was important to ensure that any adverse implications of the move for UNRWA's operational efficiency were minimized, and that UNRWA would continue to give due weight to the problems of Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

48. Australia was concerned at the financial difficulties experienced by UNRWA, and called upon all Member States to provide adequate financial backing for UNRWA programmes. For its part, Australia had maintained its position as a major contributor to UNRWA's project budget, and had managed to provide a significant increase in its total contributions during 1993/94. Over the next three years, Australian funding for UNRWA's core programme and special projects would, together with the emergency relief it was providing, exceed 11 million Australian dollars. That represented most of its $15 million pledge for economic development in the occupied territories at the international donors' conference in October 1993.

49. He concluded by paying tribute to the Commissioner-General of UNRWA and to his staff for their professionalism and dedication under difficult and trying circumstances.

50. Mr. DOUDECH (Tunisia) said that, since the signing of the Declaration of Principles, there had been significant progress which would have a beneficial effect on the work of UNRWA and also on the peace process in the Middle East as a whole.

51. He paid tribute to UNRWA for its untiring efforts to improve the living conditions of the Palestinians and refugees and for its contribution to establishing peace in the Middle East. In that connection, he wished to commend the cooperation and coordination between UNRWA and the Palestinians, which were in keeping with the objectives of an agenda for development.

52. His delegation noted the important role played by the Agency in the process of the transfer of power to the Palestinian authorities in the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area and welcomed its efforts in the social and economic sphere, which could help to strengthen the peace process in the region. Tunisia believed that the international community should give the Agency all possible support and assistance so that it could overcome the difficulties in the way of the execution of its projects.

53. Tunisia supported the decision to transfer the headquarters of UNRWA to the Gaza Strip since the administrative costs could thus be reduced and the resources saved could be directed towards the execution of social and economic development projects.

54. Noting that Tunisia had participated in the work of multilateral organs and their efforts to promote rapid progress in the peace process, he expressed his delegation's firm intention of continuing to provide assistance to UNRWA to help it to attain its high ideals and its hope that the Agency would overcome the difficulties facing it so that it would continue in the future to contribute to the process of establishing peace in the Middle East.

55. Mr. Hudyma (Chairman) took the Chair.

56. Mr. KARSGAARD (Canada) thanked the Commissioner-General and the entire staff of UNRWA who, in difficult and often dangerous conditions, continued to work to improve the situation of refugees, develop infrastructure and execute projects in the health, education and social services fields in the occupied territories and refugee camps.

57. Canada applauded the further progress made during the current year in the peace process, in particular the signing of the Agreements on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area and the conclusion of the Peace Treaty between Jordan and Israel, and it looked forward to similar breakthroughs in the negotiations with the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon.

58. He was pleased to note the Agency's active participation in the Working Group on Refugees, the Chairman of which was Canadian. In April 1994, with the active support of UNRWA, Canadian officials had led an international delegation to meet with representatives of refugees in camps in Jordan and Lebanon. On the basis of the mission's conclusions, the participants in the latest meeting of the Working Group on Refugees had stressed that refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic should not be overlooked and that the regional

perspective must remain an integral part of the Group's mandate and activities. For its part, Canada had provided additional financial support for measures to improve the situation of refugees in Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon, and had allocated $1.4 million to fund measures relating to the return to the Gaza Strip of refugee families expelled into the Sinai Peninsula.

59. Canada, which was concerned by the chronic funding shortfall faced by the Agency, had been pressing on both the bilateral and the multilateral levels for increased support for the activities of UNRWA, in particular the Peace Implementation Programme. It was especially important that countries should contribute generously to the budget of UNRWA at the current stage when the Palestinian authorities were being established.

60. At the same time, progress in the peace process had had an impact on the future role of UNRWA. The Agency's responsibilities would have to be transferred gradually to the new Palestinian authorities and to that end UNRWA must continue to work in close cooperation with the new Palestinian institutions.

61. Referring to the decision of the Secretary-General to transfer the headquarters of UNRWA to the Gaza Strip, he said that, in his delegation's view, the transfer should not divert financial resources from essential UNRWA operations elsewhere and that the interests of refugees outside the occupied territories should not be neglected in the peace process.

62. Canada would continue to assist the Agency and would make every effort to support the Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area and the Peace Treaty between Jordan and Israel.

63. Noting that the issue of refugees was central to the Arab-Israeli conflict, he said that UNRWA and the international community must work in close cooperation to ensure that Palestinian refugees participated fully in the new future of the Middle East.

64. Mr. SHAKED (Israel) thanked the Commissioner-General and the staff of UNRWA for their annual report on the work of the Agency and for the spirit of cooperation and the good working relationship which had prevailed between the Agency and the Government of Israel during the period under review.

65. Referring to the report of the Commissioner-General, he said that the positive steps towards the realization of peace described in the report had had a profound impact on the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians and on the relationship between Israel and some of its Arab neighbours in general. Israel also noted the Commissioner-General's words of appreciation to the Government of Israel for initiating proposals for the improvement of arrangements relating to UNRWA operations in the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area. He expressed his country's genuine desire to improve mutual relations with the Agency since, in the new reality which had developed in the Middle East, UNRWA had an even more important role to play in promoting the social and economic advancement envisioned in the Agreements between Israel and the PLO.

66. Israel took issue with the way in which various incidents that had taken place in the territories during the year under review were described in the report and also with the inclusion in the report of political issues, which were outside the mandate of UNRWA. In the light of the significant progress that had been achieved in the peace process, Israel considered it essential, now more than ever, that the General Assembly, in its resolutions concerning UNRWA, should focus on issues directly related to the Agency's humanitarian tasks and refrain from adopting resolutions concerning political issues which were irrelevant to the work of UNRWA and were detached from the new reality in the region. In that connection, his delegation believed that the number of resolutions on UNRWA should be considerably reduced. That would be in keeping with the need to rationalize the work of the General Assembly and would avoid references to issues such as Jerusalem, refugees and settlements which would be dealt with within the framework of the negotiations on permanent status, as agreed between Israel and the PLO.

67. Mr. TURKMEN (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) thanked all those who had spoken favourably about the work of UNRWA and assured them that the Agency would continue to strive to justify the confidence which had been placed in it.

The meeting rose at 12 noon.